

Deep within the wilds of Wonderland,
the master of mischief awakens...

A.G. HOWARD



ALICE THE
ABSENT





ALICE THE ABSENT



A SPLINTERED PREQUEL STORY BY

A.G. HOWARD

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A.G. Howard is the #1 NYT & International Bestselling author of young adult retellings/spinoff novels and adult gothic paranormal romances. Her dark Alice in Wonderland inspired Splintered series has been published in over a dozen languages and has hit bestselling lists both internationally and domestically. You can find all her titles and connect with her online at aghoward.com.

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Chapter 1: Chrysalis

November 5, 1934 – Deep within the wilds of Wonderland . . .

A muffled female scream kick-started the beat of his newly-formed heart.

Alice, is that you?

He released the question in his head, not yet ready to try his voice—too drowsy from slumbering for so long. Though slumber wasn't quite the correct word. He'd been aware of his surroundings—drifting in and out of consciousness within his binds. Hearing bits and pieces of events around him. But it was a wan awareness . . . both light and sound diffused by a gray, gossamer casing, as though a storm cloud had swallowed him whole. In the past, each time he'd tried to break free, the binds had tightened whilst blue lightning flashed around him. His prison had stretched but didn't give.

At last, today, he'd found freedom. This time when he tried, he broke the binds, and not by mere strength or force of will. He broke them because he was complete. Whole. Evolved in that same moment the shrill scream raced through his ears.

His naked buttocks and thighs rested atop a smooth cushion—seated on a large glowing orange-and-green phosphorescent mushroom that had apparently grown along with him. This was where he'd been sitting *before* he'd fallen into slumber, however long ago “before” might be.

For a moment, he forgot Alice—lost to the strangeness of his state. He clenched and unclenched ten elegant fingers, then followed with the ten toes dangling at the ends of his slender feet. It was astonishing, the ease with which this body responded—two arms, two legs, ready to obey his every whim, and there were other parts he had yet to fully explore. He traced three fingertips down his rain-stippled torso—corded muscles

feathering and twitching in their wake—to that one impressive adornment between his legs. The transformation had indeed been complete.

Magnificent.

“So, I’m a man at last . . . in all the ways that matter. A man, yet so much *better*.” This he said aloud, and his deep, masculine timbre echoed through the lair—liquescent as a waterfall and fathomless as a tidal wave. That, too, had changed. The sound of it strummed some hungry place behind his sternum—musical and bidding. He could sing notes of persuasion with a voice such as this . . . another altered characteristic that would require further exploration.

A shudder of awe resonated through his spine. He didn’t know himself today—not yet. He needed a name to begin the reacquainting process.

Metamorphosis. He crinkled his nose. The word was too cumbersome and grotesque, like the corpulent hide of an octobenus sloughed off and left to wither on the beach—all eight legs curled into an inverted spidery carapace.

He wanted a moniker both mercurial and graceful, yet weighted enough it still demanded the proper amount of awe.

Meta . . . Morphosis . . . Independently, neither felt right. He appreciated the value of phoneme, the power of words and all their biting, silvered-edges and diamond-studded-facets. Before today, language had been his livelihood—the parasol of singularity he once used to shade a frail, gelatinous form. He was the haggling riddler, keeper of Wonderland’s mysteries, a dealer in knowledge, half-truths, and lies. But, he’d been as nameless as he was shapeless.

Now, the flame of change had seared away that embryonic state, so his most volatile and potent properties could surface—distilling his destiny to its purest essence. From this point on he would deal not only in words, but also in human dreams.

He was told of a premonition before the change had come upon him—barely enough warning to prepare—that with this rebirth, his magic would evolve, giving him the ability to not only be a voyeur, but a participant in any human’s syncopal playground.

Mortal storytellers had invented mythologies based upon such symbiosis. The Greeks believed in a god with the ability to take human form and appear in people’s dreams. This god’s name was Morpheus.

Morpheus. Yes, that would do nicely.

He wished to run it by someone. Not for their opinion, mind . . . for applause and flattery. Chessie and Alice would be the perfect audience.

Alice . . .

Remembering again the scream that woke him, his muscles tensed and he strained to hear her wailing voice. Silence greeted him instead, scattered only by the breeze and the distant bellow of fanged toads underplayed by a flutter of tiny wings. How peculiar, that he could hear so far in the distance. He'd had ears in the past, but being no bigger than pinholes, they often obscured sounds. Come to think, every sensation was oversized now; all of his sensory receptors had been roused to extreme levels—so extreme it almost hurt.

Pain and discomfort . . . these were new to him, as well.

Perhaps these alterations had caused him to mistake another sound for a wail of distress. It made some sort of sense, being as the last sight he'd seen before he'd been trapped was Alice running from Queen Red. He'd been unable to offer aid, so Chessie had joined the fray, giving him hope that she'd escaped in one piece with head intact.

However, there was the possibility Chessie hadn't escaped himself, in which case, they could both be imprisoned or worse.

How long had it been? There was no need to count minutes here in Wonderland, lest one happened to be eccentric enough to keep a clock on hand for amusement or irony. What was time, after all, to an eternal realm filled with ageless beings? However, upon hindsight, in his present situation he could see some rationale behind the quirk—considering how unmoored he felt. Time served as an anchor to a human's fragile psyche.

He smacked against a nervous, dry heat along his tongue and lifted his hands toward the dripping leafy canopy high overhead, seeking the sky so he might at least decipher if it was day or night. The lightning in his veins sparked to blue staticky filaments that lit up his fingertips. The magic shot upward, catching on some branches.

What wondrous wizardry.

He tugged the branches with the glowing strands, releasing a rattle of leaves. A thousand wet drizzles coated his hair and spattered his face, shoulders, and chest. He caught several on his tongue, savoring their coolness. His taste buds prickled in gratitude. Now that he could appreciate taste, he couldn't help but crave a good smoke with some exotic tobacco. Or, better yet, food. His stomach growled as he considered the

darkened firmament appearing between the spaces he made in the branches. The sun and moon, who at his last memory had been wrestling for control of the sky, appeared to have called a truce. Night ruled for now. The openness beckoned—colorful constellations fizzing and feathering across the velvet black.

He broke contact with the trees, reeling his magic in, feeling fizzy and feathery himself. A feverish sensation raced with his pulse that he couldn't quite contain. His heart pounded in his chest, blood and magic writhing in his veins. He held his hands out in front of him and took a calming breath.

The wind raked some hair across his face, each blue strand damp with a chill that seeped through his bare skin and into his bones. Mesmerized, he fisted one hand and raked the knuckles across his lips, sampling the salted-sweet flavor of each ossified bump stretching under his pale, pliant skin. Bones . . . so durable, yet so delicate. Had Alice's bones been broken?

Where is the girl, old chap? And to that, where are you? He reached for Chessie in his thoughts.

All this time, while within his dense and claustrophobic prison, Morpheus thought of the human child in hindsight. Now, awakening to so many changes, even hindsight felt unbalanced. The memory blurred—rather like a fable he'd told at some grand gala to entertain a tableful of wild-and-wooly companions instead of a real experience he'd lived:

There once was a child named Alice. She was innocence and sweetness, happiness and light. Perhaps her only flaw was that she was very . . . curious.

Yes. That's how humans would recount Alice's tale.

"Such fools they are, Chessie-blud. Thinking curiosity a flaw. It's the only thing that makes them interesting, aye? They should bottle their inquisitiveness, make a drink as ticklish and riotous as fresh-squeezed TumTum juice." This observation he released on a breath, no more than a whisper battered about the mushroom lair on a rain-scented breeze. The quiet rustle magnified the complete and utter solitude.

This wasn't at all how he'd envisioned his awakening. He'd expected a band of misfits waiting to congratulate, to adulate—or at the very least, bits and pieces of his feline-fae companion to be standing vigil: Chessie's gleaming, wicked smile . . . his swirling, persuasive eyes . . . his fuzzy ears, wings, or that orange-and-gray ringed tail. Yet none resided here. Not even his playful spirit hovering like mist through the emptiness.

Having been a solitary netherling since his first beginning, aloneness never much bothered Morpheus. But to awaken to the unsettling memory of his two partners in mischief-and-chicanery running for their lives, he craved answers.

It appeared he'd have to seek them out himself.

His two most dazzling attributes still waited, itching to be tested and tried. They'd be the perfect means to carry him across the terrain at breakneck speed so he might solve the mysterious absence of his companions.

Standing on the mushroom's giant cap, he straightened his spine with several crackling pops, then flung back his shoulders. Satiny rustles burst to life behind him. His lips curled to a delighted grin as he dragged one large, moth-like wing around, running his fingers across the damp expanse of lustrous black. Each touch sent warm vibrations through his spine—bringing the nerves to attention, awaiting his command.

Releasing the avian appendage, he splayed both the left and right behind him. The tops stretched high above his head as the lower tips raked his naked heels. He flapped his wings, raising himself off the mushroom effortlessly, but he thrust forward too quickly and lost balance. He tottered in midair then plummeted to the grass with an “umph.” His bones rattled, and the spiky groundcover punctured his skin in all those exposed, tender places. The lacerations burned and itched simultaneously, sensations both uncomfortable and delectable. Pinpricks of blood beaded at the sites. He raked a fingertip along one warm, oozing flow and held the glossy smear up to the dappled moonlight.

“Of course. Clothing. It serves as armor as much as ornamentation.” He squinted, nettled as yet another mortal oddity took on a rational slant.

He reassessed. He should leap from somewhere higher. It was the only way to catch a current of wind and give himself lift. But if he was to keep falling, he should be clothed to protect his flesh. He knew exactly who to visit for a tailored wardrobe, someone known to always have a spot of tea brewing and refreshments on hand. It was highly possible Alice and Chessie were both already there, indulging in a tea party.

The thought renewed his need to find them. A mirror passage would be the safest mode of travel, though the limitation spurred a snarl in his throat. Such a glorious opportunity for flight, but not yet mastered enough

to face the sky raw and untethered by human armor. It was almost too much to stomach.

He'd no sooner stood and brushed himself off than the scream pierced the air in the distance again, this time as clear as a tiny, tinkling bell. He recognized the chiming voice now, and was relieved that it didn't belong to Alice as he'd thought.

This particular female wouldn't be wailing lest her very life was on the line. Yet he only slightly knew her—perhaps not enough to even bother saving her. She was a vain little thing, driven by selfishness and lust. In the past, while seeking his advice as everyone did, she'd looked upon him with an air of indifference, considering his appearance too vague and ungraceful for attention. If nothing else, it would be interesting to see how his refinement would impact her perspective. But aside from that, should he save her, she could be of use in helping him find Alice, as well as his new place in Wonderland.

Arching an eyebrow, he flapped his wings and clambered atop the mushroom again. He would take a crash course—naked through the trees—after all. No time for finesse if one wished to be mistaken for a hero and collect on the spoils of valor and vice.



Chapter 2: Encounters

In the netherling realm, size didn't matter. Even the smallest creature could prove formidable, lest one knew their weaknesses and how to exploit them.

Morpheus kept this in mind whilst on his way to the Boojum Swamp. Thanks to his earlier transformation, he was now bigger than the fanged toads. Whereas once he'd been as small as the sprite whose screeches jingled in the distance, today he stood tall as a man. The toads would be no bigger than a cat in comparison to him. However, they had ossified barbs on the ends of their spiny tongues and weren't easy to intimidate. Their only real fear was exercise, which explained why they never hopped about. It worked well enough for them, as they didn't need to seek prey. They simply hunkered on their lily pads or lotus blossoms, lazy and fat, waiting to cast out their hooks as a fisherman would. A target was accessible as far as four feet away when in clear view, and their serrated appendages doubled as razor-sharp ropes, enabling them to truss-up and slice through almost any surface—even bone. Only a Bandersnatch's thick hide or an elfin knight's steel armor could withstand their whip-sharp tongues. Thus, they could take down any creature of any size should they be hungry enough. And, in the darkness, the only warning a victim had was their trumpeting bellows and a flash of fiery red pupils.

Morpheus's eardrums thrummed. The shrill, chiming wails for help had reached a piercing frequency, and he'd need a weapon if he wished to rescue the victim yet still protect his vulnerabilities. Fortunately, as he burst forth from the trees—garnering more scrapes and scratches along his exposed flesh—he spotted a swarm of spindlefies.

The bugs varied in size from thumb's length to smaller than a fingernail and had a penchant for stitching rainbows across the sky with their needle-like abdomens. Their bodies—tapered to the shape of spindles—spontaneously produced skeins upon skeins of thread, the color and

texture of whatever flower they'd last supped upon. This particular swarm must have snacked upon the daffodils, bluebells, and violets that grew in Lorina the Lory's shimmery brass garden, judging by the metallic gold, blue, and purple weave sharing his moonlit air space.

Morpheus chuckled at his good fortune. He redirected his trajectory and plunged into the center of the swarm's zig-zagging antics. They adjusted their spinning patterns to include him, so determined to complete their tapestry they refused any opening for escape. Morpheus had expected such, as spindleglies were renowned for their perfectionism and despised leaving any piece half-done.

The knitted metal rainbow tangled with his wings, arms, legs, fingers and toes. He freefell for all of twenty breaths before managing to rip free, taking half the needlework with him. Using his own glowing strands of magic, he secured the loose brassy mesh around himself until he'd fashioned a colorful and lightweight chainmail. The close-fitted armor insulated his naked skin while leaving his limbs free to move about. Only his wings, head, and hands remained bared.

He flew upward, abandoning the fluttering artisans who buzzed furiously in an effort to gather the remains of their dangling masterpiece. He knew they'd seek him later for recompense, but he'd find a way to reason with them—either with honeyed words or better yet, a scheme.

Braiding the remainder of the wiry needlework into a lasso caused Morpheus to veer off-course. He realized mid-flight and resituated his wings. The momentary unbalance plummeted him too close to the tulgey wood. Several skeletal, white branches reached up to snag him but their grip slipped off his glossy armor. One used the thorny leaves at the tip of its twigs to snag his braided rope. Morpheus strained against its grip, barely pulling free before it could drag him into its mouth and gobble him whole. During escape—though he salvaged his brass noose—he caught an unruly updraft. He drifted so close to the moon that its tender light shimmered off his gleaming chainmail. Mistaking its reflection for a rival planet, the moon became shy and tried to hide behind the sun. As a result, the two lights resumed their wrestling match in the sky, cloaking the terrain with a psychedelic haze that confused Morpheus's recently acquired humanoid eyesight.

He rolled up the lasso and circled the swamp in search of a spot that would offer safe landing. Enough bruises and scrapes already marred him,

and he wouldn't risk accruing any more by making careless decisions. Everything stood out too bright against the darkness and blurred together, making it difficult to discern the toads' red pupils, much less to differentiate between luminous silver ferns along the banks and glowing white lotus blossoms atop the water. He relied instead upon his heightened sense of smell and sound. The closer to the water he came, the more the rotten-egg stench of stagnancy stung his nostrils. And the shrill, tinkering cries for help—interspersed with the deep bellows and smacking lips of toads—came from somewhere to the right. So, he would need to land as far left as possible.

He soared downward, finding a current of wind to slow his descent. His feet alighted among the ferns. Their soft, damp fronds swished across his armor-clad ankles while stretching high enough to tap lightly at his temples. He felt his way toward the banks then peered through a slit between stems.

There she was: Gossamer, ringleader of the sprites—all of whom shared her lovely female form as small as a firefly's, glittery scales curving strategically around breasts and torsos, and bulbous coppery eyes lit up by lime-green flesh. Odd for her to be out alone, he conjectured, though close as she was to the tulgey wood she must've been scouting for deviates . . . those unfortunate netherlings that the trees chewed up and spat out into misshapen forms. The sprites enjoyed jousts and gaming tournaments and often recruited the rejects for entertainment, reasoning that they were already ruined and expendable.

Gossamer must have lost her way, for she'd fallen into the sunken side of the swamp and was adrift within a bubble on the brackish surface. A circlet of five fanged toads surrounded her from above. Seated on lotus petals, they watched her with pupils brightened to pin-lights. Their double chins drummed, swelling in anticipation of their feast.

Usually they hunted alone, but Morpheus had tangled with this nasty lot once before—when he was his other self. These five claimed to be cleverer than most, as they'd seen the advantage of hunting in a pack. They'd almost proven their point that day. Having no hands or wings to aid him, Morpheus wouldn't have survived had it not been for a timely appearance from Chessie's free-flying tail. As the toads redirected their attention to what they perceived to be a hairy, juicy slug twice the size of the prey they'd trapped (their kind always believed the lilies greener on

the other side of the pond) and readied their fanged tongues to strike—Morpheus escaped. Immediately thereafter, Chessie vanished his tail, leaving the toads with empty stomachs. The fanged predators bawled in rage until they'd lost their voices. Sadly, they'd regained their ability to bark up snark again.

"I'll snare her wings," one bellowed—his timbre as grating as a rusted gate's hinge swiveling in the wind.

"And I, her legs," another grunted, his puffed-up slimy lips smacking like the suction of mud around a boot.

Gossamer yelped, her teensy hands pressed to the inside of the bubble. Her long, sparkling hair swished in the draft of her wings as the transparent ball skated across the surface in frothy circles, nowhere left to go lest she lift it. She was wary enough to resist that temptation.

Morpheus respected her restraint. He himself had taught her that, yet he had doubted she'd ever remember. She obviously did; how else would she anticipate that the toads were baiting her, hoping to set her to launch, if she hadn't remembered him telling her that was their way? It made for more sporting fun, if they each had a go with their hooks. Not that toads cared about good sportsmanship, mind, but they did enjoy casting lots and laying claim to their victim's body parts. It was intrinsic to their scare tactics; prey tasted better when spiced with fear, after all.

"I'll hook her head, that I will," croaked a third.

"And I . . ." Morpheus intoned aloud, still hidden behind neck-high ferns as he shaped several fronds into wings that matched his own, albeit a smaller version. These he tucked into the braided brass just above the lasso. "Shall trap the fangs."

"Fangs?" the fourth toad belched, his globular gaze jerking from bank to bank, seeking the source of the quip. "Sprites don't have fangs."

"Ah, right you are." Morpheus snorted softly behind his wall of leaves. "I should clarify. I intend to snag all of you."

"Who said that?" came the rusty-hinged response from the first toad as three of the others bellowed in laughter, scorning anyone's ability to better them.

Morpheus noted that the fifth of the bunch—the wartiest one who hadn't spoken a word thus far—chose that moment to slide into the muck. Keeping one eye out for the retreating toad, Morpheus extended the lasso, allowing sparks of magic to climb his hand and fringe the braided brass in

pulsing blue light. He raised his arm high enough to catch the remaining four toads' attention, bouncing his winged puppet so it appeared to billow on air currents.

"It's a moth . . . a moth as plump as a sparrow!" The first toad croaked gleefully. "We'll gobble its guts then add it to our collection!"

Not only were these particular fanged toads infamous for trapping and eating moths by the barrelful, they refused to release the insect spirits post-death. The toads held them trapped in an enchanted glass cube that projected their shadows like a luminary would cast star-shaped lights. The toads used those fluttery silhouettes for target practice. It was a sad way for any winged creature to spend their afterlife, trapped and tormented instead of at peace in their ghostly flights of fancy.

Angered by the thought, Morpheus coaxed the light around his puppet to pulse faster, brighter. Mesmerized, the four pairs of toads' eyes grew larger and their red pupils dilated, practically spinning with gluttony.

Just as Morpheus had anticipated, Gossamer was all but forgotten.

Twirling the lasso further captivated them, and without even laying claim to the "moth's" various parts, four fanged tongues snapped into action. The instant each barb caught on the noose, Morpheus flicked his wrist to shut it tight, trapping them by their own weapons.



Chapter 3: Alliances

Morpheus lifted the fanged toads so they hung midair, their barbs caught in the knot and prickly tongues stretched taut—unable to slice through the metallic binding. Their legs flopped haplessly about. Blue staticky lines spread out from the rope, enveloping them in a magical net. The captives kicked their legs harder in hopes to break the glowing tangled strands, but having not used their muscles for anything more than squatting, they hadn't any strength to escape.

Setting the wriggling net aside, Morpheus slid down the margins. His wings remained on the bank, draped behind him like a cloak as he crouched in the thigh-high water. Cold sludge seeped into his chainmail, causing goosebumps to rise along his skin. He lowered his right wrist, and with his forefinger, burst the bubble. Gossamer dunked under for an instant. He plunged his other hand, palm open, beneath the surface. Coughing and sputtering in her tinkling timbre, she clambered aboard and hugged his thumb as he fished her out.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you . . . g-g-gallant, b-b-beautiful mortal!" she coughed and rubbed her eyes—her vision obviously blurred by the wetness. "I c-c-can pamper and pleasure, or lead you to f-f-fairy treasure."

She released a minute sneeze that shook fluff from her wings. It rose on the breeze like dandelion fuzz. Morpheus was well acquainted with the power of said fluff, how it could entrance a human into dreamland. Having a ready supply was one of the reasons he'd rescued her in spite of the danger to himself; if he were to become adept at hijacking human dreams, he would need a lot of practice, which could only be accomplished with a means to trigger their sleep.

“Ask anything of m-m-me or mine. I’m in your d-d-debt.” Her trembling left hand covered her heart as she blotted more droplets from her lashes with the right. “On my life magic, I vow my service to you, for all of f-f-forever and then some!”

Morpheus smirked. That’s just what he’d been waiting to hear. One moment away from claiming his prize, a boisterous gurgle broke the water’s surface as something long, bristled and wiry smacked against his forearm, wrapping it. Two submerged red eyes glared up at him. The fifth toad had at last reappeared. Hard as he pulled, his saw-toothed tongue couldn’t cut through Morpheus’s armor. Shifting direction, the appendage writhed toward Gossamer where she sat on his palm. She screeched in dismay and burrowed into Morpheus’s chainmail sleeve.

The warty creature struggled to follow her retreat with his tongue, but his barb snagged in the brassy weave of Morpheus’s shirt. With a sigh, Morpheus stood and waded out of the muck, towing the toad along with him. After dragging him ashore, Morpheus worked the barbed tongue free of his armor and allowed it to retract into the toad’s whimpering mouth. He then settled his newest catch against the vibrating blue net and within moments, the strands engulfed the addition, trapping him with the other captives.

Morpheus lifted the net and splayed out his wings, shaking murky water off their satiny surfaces. He lowered his head close to his victims. “It appears I win. Catch of the day.”

They bellowed and croaked, begging him to set them free.

“Afraid not. You were auctioning off the lovely lady’s parts. And seeing as she’s sworn herself to my keep, I’m responsible for her well-being. That includes retribution upon those who would eat her for dinner, aye?”

Gossamer wriggled out from under Morpheus’s sleeve and knelt on his inner wrist. Her copper-orbed gaze focused on his face then shifted to his wings. She smiled admiringly. “Wait . . . you are no mere man. You’re one of us.”

“Yes, I belong in the wilds.”

“Why have we never met?” she asked on a melodious trill while brushing away the muddy droplets that smudged her glittering scales. “I would not forget a face so dazzling as yours.”

“Oh, we’ve met.” He grinned, stroking strands of dripping, silvery hair from her cheeks with his pinky. He tucked them behind one of her pointed

ears and tilted her chin upward. “Even if you don’t know my face or voice, surely you can recognize my wisdom.”

“Wisdom?”

“I knew exactly how to defeat your attackers, as I understood their weaknesses. You came to me once seeking that very advice. And I daresay, you’d have been dead this eve before I arrived, had you not used it.”

“Oh!” She clapped a wet hand over her mouth. “*Wisdom*,” she whispered from behind her fingers. “You’re *that one*?”

“In the flesh.”

She stood shakily, balancing her stance as she preened her wings. “But, you don’t look like yourself at all today. How could you possibly be one and the same?”

“I agree, the changes are impressive. Play your cards right, and later I shall show you the full extent of my not-sameness.”

She giggled, blushing a darker green as she took to the air and fluttered at eye level, observing him from head to toe. “It is indeed you. I’d know that wit anywhere.”

His brow furrowed teasingly. “And here I thought you never took notice.”

She tousled droplets from her already tangled hair, wings vibrating in a blur behind her. “You always had charm. But now . . .”

“Now, I have flair.” He splayed out his arms, his brass armor jingling beneath the complaints of the toads where they dangled from the net in his fingers.

“Flair, and blue hair,” she sputtered, giggling again as she curtsied mid-flight. “Ask anything of me.”

He cocked his head. “I’ve quite a list of requisitions. But first, I need the help of all the spritelings. You and yours are the rumor circuit in our land. I’m seeking Alice and Chessie. Surely one of them knows of their whereabouts.”

Her lips curled on a rueful pout. “Oh, dear. *The Alice*, well . . . she’s no longer in Wonderland. After she went to trial and escaped Red’s wrath, she was returned to the human realm.”

“Back to her home?” Morpheus felt an odd hollowness in his gut. “How long have I been tucked away—in human measurings?”

“Most of Alice’s life. You’ve been missing for seventy-five years.”

Though pleased she'd survived, Morpheus felt his chin tighten upon the fact that Alice would now be an eighty-two-year-old woman. He never even got to say goodbye—which was completely unacceptable after all the brilliant havoc they'd wreaked together. He would need to use one of the kingdoms' portals to the mortal world if he wished to see her again. "So, is Queen Red still in power?"

"She went into hiding after she lost her crown—to avoid exile in the looking-glass world."

"Is that so? Then who's minding the Red Castle?"

"I'll give you a hint: she's half the royalty Red is, and prefers ribbons to lace."

"Drat." Morpheus frowned. It wouldn't do any good to ask that woolgathering moppet for use of her portal. She probably couldn't even remember what she'd had for breakfast. Morpheus tapped his finger against a tingling sensation that spanned from his eyes to his cheekbones. A spattering of glassy nodules met his touch. Beguiled, he glanced at his moonlit reflection in the swamp's surface to look upon his face for the first time. A sharp breath razed his windpipe. It was fitting he'd chosen a Greek god as his namesake, for his features were as ageless, symmetrical, and perfect as any celestial being's. But there was a bizarre slant to his beauty that marked him unmistakably as a netherling: dark lines curled around his eyes like a wilderness of lashes and glowing multi-faceted jewels flashed at the tips in a riotous rainbow of color. Considering how confuddled he felt at the moment, the gems must be tied somehow to his moods. *How fascinating.*

"I'll look to the other kingdom," he conjectured aloud, reluctantly turning away from this latest remarkable self-discovery. "The Ivory Queen should have some insight as to how I can find Alice. And we're on good enough terms, she'll allow me access to her portal into the human realm. We'll visit her castle." It would be both a pleasure and an education to seduce answers out of the exquisite monarch using his new attributes.

Gossamer's face twisted to a somber expression. "Ivory is not so accessible of late. She has sealed herself up in her icy palace with only her elfin knights for company, and they've not been letting anyone in. She's withdrawn and inconsolable, though no one knows why. As for Chessie, he's been mostly vanished since the trial as well. But I will ask each of my sisters if they've seen head or tail, Master."

“*Master.*” Morpheus’s jaw twitched. “Much as I like the sound of that, I’ve acquired a name with this rebirth . . . I go by Morpheus.”

“Since you saved my life, you will always be Master to me and mine.”

He smiled, and in his peripheral the jewels around his eyes blinked a regal purple. No denying it, the title suited him. “Whatever you wish, my spritely pet.”

Her coy, silvery laughter drifted on the night breeze. The ferns surrounding them swayed as if in time with the melody. “Shall I lead you to our nest then? My sisters will be eager to make your reacquaintance. Though I fear you’ll be too tall to sit at our table in this form.”

“True. However, I’ve the ability to take a smaller form—one I should like to test—once I rid myself of this baggage.” He eyed the fat, squirming toads who were pleading again for their lives. “On that note, I might be convinced to go easier on you five, should you tell me where you hid those moth spirits you’ve been hoarding.”

As they coughed up directions to the enchanted cube, Morpheus’s mind wandered back to Alice’s and Chessie’s absences. He was unfamiliar with the sensation of missing someone. He didn’t like the restless itch in his chest, nor did he wish for it to continue. Thus, he assured himself he wasn’t missing them at all. He was simply bemused by their absences. Once he solved the mystery of their whereabouts, he could resume exploring the wonders of his transformation sans any distractions.

He found the glassy cube bobbing in the swamp beneath a fern overhang on the far side of the margin. Thousands of winged shadows butted against the lid in a bid for help, their silhouettes projecting on the silvery leaves like inky imprints. “Patience, little brothers and sisters. Soon, you’ll have an infinite expanse in which to fly.” Morpheus turned back to Gossamer who hovered at his shoulder. “You and your scintillant sisterhood will follow me to *my* nest. We’ll build it tonight. Then, tomorrow, I shall have an intimate dinner party and entice Ivory from her confinement. Once she’s attended, etiquette dictates she’ll relay an invite to her castle in return.” Ivory had invited him over for high tea often in his past form, craving intellectual stimulation. They were well matched—conversationally. No doubt she’d been missing their dialogues. And come tomorrow, she’d find that he was now not only a match mentally, but physically. He would cure her loneliness by taking their parley to a new

level: *pillow talk*. In turn, she would be grateful. And a queen's gratitude was invaluable.

"By tomorrow, Master?" Gossamer interrupted his musings. "Is it to be an actual nest then, made of twigs and twine?"

"Absolutely not. I require a manor befitting a nobleman—constructed of wood, nails, and glass . . . preferably three stories, with a mirror hall for swift escapes, and a banquet table grand enough to entertain all of Wonderland's solitary fae."

Gossamer cocked her head in a scolding manner. "Even with my hundreds of sisters helping, how can that be accomplished? None of us have strength enough to lift hammers or wield saws!"

Morpheus grinned. Her sudden change in demeanor raised her voice to the pitch of tiny chains chinking in a windstorm and brightened her bulbous eyes to the incandescence of copper kettles fringed with flame. This teensy darling had no qualms challenging him—a characteristic he found surprisingly appealing. "Ah, sweet pet. As if I'd suggest any of my pretties mar their petite hands with manual labor. I've already arranged for the help." He shook the net, causing his captive toads to bawl in misery. "Since they were cooperative per the moths, I must allow them to live. However, I never said they'd resume their prior way of living. We'll drop these warty pests off at the tulgey wood and fashion them into something more . . . useful."

"Oh, indeed?" Her lips trembled with suppressed glee. "New toys?"

"New *tools*." Morpheus flapped his wings and took to the air—chain mail jingling. He motioned to his spriteling. "Gossamer fair, take hold of my hair." With that, she wrapped herself within the blue strands and held on for dear life as they soared high above Wonderland's phosphorescent landscapes.



Chapter 4: Machinations

Housebuilding proved a fitting project to put the toads to. Seeing as they'd never done a day's labor, they had a lifetime of slothfulness for which to make up.

As a rule, Morpheus had always avoided the tulgey forest. However, this had been a worthy exception. All it had taken was tossing the toads in with hammers, paintbrushes, levelers, sandpaper, and saws. When the tulgey spit them back out in mutated forms, each toad had legs that could file down splinters, drill holes, hammer nails, paint, and level frames. And with the fangs upon their tongues replaced by saws, they craved nothing but the taste of wood, which made them famished for carpentry work.

By the time dawn arrived—when the sun had defeated the moon for a spell—the orange and golden tendrils of daylight glimmered upon Morpheus's newly completed manor. Outside, the paint was still drying (he'd chosen a brilliant blue in honor of his newfound hair and magic), and the sleek windows begged to be cleaned of smudges. However, inside was a masterpiece: wide arched windows, cathedral-vaulted ceilings, tapestried walls, opulent furnishings, and a symphony made up of living instruments that had been provided by the denizens of Wonderland who owed him for years of doling out wisdom. He'd kept tabs on each and every service, and at last called in all the debts. Throughout the night, everything had been paid in full.

To respect the terrain whereupon his house was built, Morpheus refused to uproot trees, level hills, or dry up lakes. Instead, he allowed the wilds of Wonderland to roam free within, weaving the natural landscape into the décor. Grassy carpets in neon colors cushioned the floors, a waterfall formed the canopy for his bed, a cluster of leafless trees provided a rack for hats (of which he'd always hoped for a collection—a goal soon to be fulfilled since he now had a skull of his own), and rocky hills had been carved into stairways. One such stairway, hidden behind a wall, stretched all the way into his mirror hall. It was here he'd liberated the bottled-up

moth spirits and chortled at their delight upon bouncing between panes of silver and glass, each silhouette forever safe yet free to flutter to their lifeless heart's content.

Now, all that was left was sending Ivory an invitation and perfecting his debut as an eligible escort. He'd set the sprites to the tasks, and several had returned with news that Hattington—the local haberdasher—was inexplicably indisposed. This left Morpheus in a quandary. He'd have to wait to begin his hat collection, but he had the perfect plan for his vestments. He sent for some periodicals from the Shop of Human Eccentricities—where mortal trinkets were sold as collectibles—for insight into the latest gentlemen's fashion.

Next, in lieu of a tailor, he opened his doors to the swarm of spindlegflies he'd offended and offered them a treaty: a chance to stitch his entire wardrobe—the first masterpiece of any such kind in all of Wonderland. Unable to resist such notoriety, they began work immediately on his debut suit. They supped upon velvety burgundy roses for trousers and jacket, and silky black and white *Dianthus* flowers for a complementing striped shirt; the bloom's white serrated petals lent themselves beautifully to lacy-edged sleeves and collar ruffles. Like he'd done with the chainmail, Morpheus used his own magic as a needle to reinforce the seams and cinch the fabric to his body for the most tantalizing fit. He wore his unruly blue hair tied back in a queue (for when free it had the tendency to pulse like a sea anemone—another byproduct of his evolving powers). Most importantly of all, he crafted himself a hat by cutting a large mushroom cap from its stem, shaping it to his head and trimming it with ribbon. Once Hattington was again available, he would upgrade. But for now, this makeshift one would do.

By the time Ivory arrived on the wings of a swan with a company of knights flanking her shadow upon the ground, Morpheus met her in midair in moth-form. He then led her into the dining hall on currents of candlelit, roast-pheasant-scented air—leaving her knights to stand guard outside the manor.

Both swan and moth transmuted to their human forms and he placed his mushroom hat on his head and doffed it in a gentlemanly pose. Encouraged by her expression of pleased surprise, he took her hand and dismissed his sprite attendants who'd lined the table with satin napkins,

sparkling crystal bowls of sugared fruit, and silver cups filled with custard.

When Ivory wove her fingers through Morpheus's own, a thrill of warmth shot through his veins. "It happened . . . my vision came true . . ." She beamed beneath her diamond-studded crown, and her complexion glowed like moonlight. "You're more beautiful than I could've ever imagined." She touched his face, tracing the jewels that blinked from deep blue to bright pink.

"I have always thought the same of you." His fingertips followed her own netherling marks, touching where they flanked her temples like dragonfly wing imprints.

Her fingers entwined with his, framing her face. "You have hands."

He offered a crooked smile. "That's the least of my new attributes."

Her pale blue eyes—the same crystalline tone as her lashes, hair, and eyebrows—trailed Morpheus's face then across his wings and down his lean legs to the tips of his shoes in appreciation. By some instinct, Morpheus knew the hunger in her expression would not be appeased by food. "Before we dine, let us dance." He snapped his fingers. "Harp, play a berceuse for our regal guest."

Propped in the corner, the instrument strummed its strings, releasing a celestial, melancholy melody to accompany their whispered exchange as Morpheus took her right hand. Curving his other across her lower back, he waltzed her across the carpeted floor. Their wings scraped over neon grasses in their wake, like fanciful robes of feather and satin.

"This is not at all what I would have expected as a showcase for your awakening. Not vainglorious you." Her shapely pink lips curved to a heart-shaped smile filled with adoration. "Grandstanding and applause, yes. Quiet indulgence, no."

He tipped his head, allowing his hat to slide slightly askew. "I wanted to reveal myself to you alone first . . . as you've always been my favorite."

She brightened, flattered in spite of her efforts to hide it. "I must admit, I have missed our high teas."

"As have I. And we've time enough to make up for that later. But first, I need you to *show* me."

"Show you?"

Morpheus gestured to the harp. "How to do that."

"Make music?"

“I already know how to make music.” He hummed a few bars of the harp’s haunting lullaby, utilizing his deep, resonant voice.

Ivory’s fair skin flushed to purple and her knees nearly gave. “Sing it again . . .”

“No, dear Ivory.” He leaned close enough to skim her earlobe with his lips, inhaling her scent of winter-bright apples and sun-warmed feathers. “I wish to hear *you* sing. To play you like an instrument. Share with me that most special dance between two partners.”

Her arm tightened around his waist. “Are you saying—?” The question ended with an eager tremble of vocal chords.

“Yes.” He pressed his lips to hers, then drew back to catch the haze of desire misting her eyes. “I called you here so I could master the art of being a man.”



Chapter 5: Catalyst

Some hours later, as he drowsed beside The Ivory Queen in bed beneath plush blankets, a sunrise split the sky outside.

Ivory smiled—a vision of grace and loveliness—then snuggled close to him. “At last, my days of loneliness are ended.”

Morpheus unwrapped her from around him, flipping to his back to study the waterfall canopy overhead. “And my days of dalliances have just begun. Think of all the partners waiting to acquaint the new me.” He smiled and crossed his arms behind his neck; under the covers, he contracted his shoulder blades. The action stretched his wings and nudged his current partner to the far side. Ivory sputtered as the waterfall sprayed upon her face. Frowning, she blew a breath across it, freezing it to a curtain of ice.

She sat up, wings sandwiched between her spine and the frosted barrier. “What do you mean, ‘partners’?” She shivered, her skin glistening in daylight muted by the ice panel.

Shoving unruly strands of blue hair from his face, he unfurled his spine leisurely to a sitting position then bowed close so they were eye to eye. “I need experience, my swan. Practice makes perfect, and you deserve nothing but perfection.” He tapped her icy nose. “To be a masterful negotiator—to gain the power I seek—I must learn to be an accomplished *dancer*.”

She frowned. “Love isn’t an artifice with which to haggle.”

“Who said anything of *love*?”

Her jaw gaped. “What of loyalty then?”

“Loyalty, bah. Just as the wuthering winds carry me to-and-fro across Wonderland’s wilds, thus are the windings of my heart.”

“No. My crown magic not only foretold your transformative awakening, it predicted you would pledge fealty to one kingdom.”

Morpheus laughed and tossed his covers aside. “That’s ludicrous. Now that I at last have knees, I certainly don’t intend to bend them to anyone.”

Ivory clutched the castoff blankets up to her neck. “But . . . I am sure it meant you would fall in love with me and be my faithful consort. With Red gone, and her replacement happily married, I’m the only logical choice.”

“Sweet bird,” Morpheus crooned, his fingertip tracing her collar bone where it peeked out from the covers. “I will share dances with you as often as you please. But you should understand better than anyone—now that I have wings, I won’t be tethered down. I’ll perch from time to time, so you need not be lonely. I’m at your beck and call . . . as long as you understand our arrangement.”

Her frosty eyes grew watery. “I’ll win your devotion. You will see. My predictions are never wrong.”

Morpheus shrugged. “You’re welcome to try. I’m always up for a contest of wits and will. But for now, I’ve Alice and Chessie to seek.”

“None of us have seen Chessie in ages. You’d be better off banging on the gates of the Garden of Souls.”

Every muscle in Morpheus’s naked masculine body tensed. “You think he’s been . . . *separated*?”

“I think he is in hiding. It’s hard to know either way, since the keepers won’t allow any of us inside lest we are dead ourselves.”

Morpheus thought upon the moth spirits he’d freed within his mirror expanse. “I might have a bargaining chip to turn those tides now.”

“Really, what would that be?”

He waved a hand. “It doesn’t concern you. But since Chessie’s whereabouts is a dead end, pun intended . . . I’ll seek Alice first. Considering she ages each day, ‘tis a more urgent quest anyway. I’ll have to use your kingdom’s portal to the human realm, and I need her whereabouts there—should you know them.”

Ivory cocked her pretty head, her long swanlike neck curving gracefully. “I don’t. Charlie, the red court’s jester, was assigned to take her home as a child . . . against Queen Red’s desires.”

Morpheus frowned, envisioning the jester: the body of a dodo bird, the head of a man, and humanlike hands protruding from the tips of his stubby wings. “So, I should query Charlie. Once I have Alice’s childhood address, I’ll have a starting point.”

“He’s gone missing as well. When Red escaped, the dodo hid himself to avoid her wrath. My knights say his wife flies by the castle with each new dawn—on her way to Wonderland’s highest cliffs in search of him.”

“Then I’ll follow Lorina’s trail and find her husband myself.”

Ivory pouted. “Leave *The Alice* be. Even should you find her in the human world, she is no longer a girl, but an antiquated woman. The aging mortal mind . . . it’s more fragile than a winter pond in mid-thaw.” She raked her hand across the shimmery curtain she’d earlier frosted until it dripped and crackled in the wake of her warm touch. In a blink, it shifted back to the waterfall.

That same deliquescent sensation sluiced behind Morpheus’s sternum—setting a chill upon his heart. What if Ivory was right? What if Alice had lost her mind by now? What if she couldn’t remember all their follies and fun?

“I simply need . . . closure,” Morpheus insisted, more for himself than Ivory. “Then I’ll put this all behind me.” Taking advantage of the thawed canopy, he rolled off the mattress through the waterfall. The cascade drew back like a curtain, allowing his passage without dampening even a wing tip.

“It is not so much the absence of her presence, but of her acumen, that will hinder such a venture,” Ivory answered, rolling out from her side of the mattress and splaying her white, feathery wings behind her. The water dropped back into place in a gurgling melody, and she and Morpheus pulled on their clothes while facing one another at the foot of the bed. “Any memory she once had of you—or us—is most probably lost, lest she wrote it down.”

Morpheus shook his head, unwilling to believe it. In Alice’s subconscious, she would remember him. He was unforgettable in any form. He eased into his jacket, wings sliding through slits in the back to rise tall behind him.

Ivory helped him tie a cravat around his neck. “Even should you find her. What then? You would bring her back here as a decrepit old fool, confuse her and frighten her?”

He squeezed the queen’s fingers gently, then stepped back. “No. I will walk into her dreams; I can remind her without uprooting her. Bring her here in *sleep* so we can have a grand last hurrah before we say our goodbyes.” He suspected he had the means to peel back the boundary of a

human's unconsciousness. By combining the sprites' fairy fuzz with his hookah's tobacco, the smoke would seep within his every pore and vein, enhancing his magic to induce sleep and pave the way for dreamscapes. But he needed a human to practice this theory upon. And who better than his daring little compatriot in crime—always up for a new adventure? Surely that part of Alice hadn't been affected by age. He could make her young again in her dreams . . . such a gift would compensate for abandoning her when she was lost here so many years ago, frightened and running from Red.

Ivory opened the door to the balcony, stepping onto the ledge to study Wonderland's beautifully strange landscapes. Morpheus followed behind.

"I fear you are setting yourself up for heartache. And take it from one who knows, it is a pain you will not get over so easily." Standing in a breeze, she braided her long, silvery hair until it draped across her shoulder to her waist, glistening in the dawn's light like a pearl-scaled serpent. Her eyes narrowed. "Then again, perhaps it will do you some good. Perhaps this is the fulfillment of my vision. You will return to me, your heart's seams unravelling. Then I will mend them . . . winning your love after all."

Morpheus's jaw twitched. He had no intention of ever loving—merely of living; and the only role a heart had to play in life was to beat steadily. No matter what came of his findings, his heart's rhythm wouldn't change any more than his solitary ways would.

Without another word, he dove off the balcony and lifted into the sky on his way to the highest cliffs of Wonderland—determined to know what had become of the woman named Alice.

The End (or rather, the beginning . . .)

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About the author:

A.G. Howard is the #1 NYT & International Bestselling author of young adult retellings/spinoff novels and adult gothic paranormal romances. Her dark Alice in Wonderland inspired *Splintered* series has been published in over a dozen languages and has hit bestselling lists both internationally and domestically. For her entire list of book titles and to connect with her online, visit her website at aghoward.com.